

Those Daring Young Writers And Their Fabulous Pulps

By Gerry de la Ree

IF YOU GREW up in America in the 1920s or 1930s, you probably recall the corner candy store and its display of pulp magazines, usually arranged row upon row with just enough of their garish covers showing to whet the interest of a teenager in search of excitement.

Titles like *Doc Savage*, *The Shadow*, *Weird Tales*, *Terror Tales*, *The Phantom Detective*, *Horror Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, *G-8 And His Battle Aces*, *The Mysterious Wu-Fang*, *Operator 5*, *The Spider*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Dime Mystery*. There were far too many to list. Some lasted only a few issues, others ran successfully for many years.

If you weren't there, you can't really appreciate the air of anticipation which preceded each monthly appearance of your favorite publication, the manner in which you eagerly devoured each adventure of your special brand of literature, the way you fended off the scorn of friends, the displeasure of your parents, and the critical glances of high-school teachers.

You were hooked on pulps.

The pulps: what were they and where did they go?

They were magazines featuring adventure fiction in a variety of fields—mystery, horror, fantasy, science-fiction, aviation, western, love, and sadistic sex. Most measured 9¾ inches by 6¾ inches, were printed on cheap pulp paper, and had untrimmed edges.

They were born with the Munsey chain—*Argosy* being its most famous offspring—around the turn of the century. They sprouted like weeds in a field in the Prohibition days of the 1920s, reached their apex in the Depression period of the 1930s, and were dealt a death blow in the 1940s by World War II.

While the ranks of the pulps were severely thinned in that 1942-46 period, there was a brief post-war renaissance, especially in the then expanding science-fiction field, but one by

one the familiar titles fell by the wayside or shrunk into the digest-sized format that today hides beneath its neatly trimmed edges the once flourishing field of the American pulp magazine.

About the only surviving magazines that can be directly traced to the pulp days are *Amazing Stories* and *Analog*. *Amazing* was founded in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback as the first all-science fiction magazine. Until 1933 it was large-sized (8½ by 11¾) with trimmed edges. Late in 1933, however, it dropped into the pulp format

and remained so until its transformation into digest size in 1953.

Analog started life as *Astounding Stories* in 1930 and remained a pulp until November 1943, when it became the first of the Street and Smith chain to go digest. *Doc Savage* and *The Shadow* followed soon after. The *Analog* title was adopted in 1960.

The remaining SF magazines being published today started since 1948 in digest format.

Argosy, the granddaddy of them all and a magazine that appeared weekly during the 1920s and 1930s, was

last published as a pulp in 1943. Thereafter it bore no resemblance to the publication that featured the best of the pulp writers and maintained its great popularity with six-part serials.

THE SECOND World War not only put the handwriting on the wall for the pulps, but also was responsible for many of the early issues being donated to paper drives. This, coupled with the normal deterioration of the magazines, set the stage for today's almost frantic search for back

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Virgil Finlay was one of the most imaginative of the oldtime pulp illustrators. His meticulous pen and ink drawings, like the one at left, went down the drain on the inferior paper, but for him it was all a labor of love.

The pen names were numerous, the verbal output staggering

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issues of these elusive publications.

There is an ever-increasing group of collectors seeking out an ever-decreasing supply of the more desirable pulps. The magazines, sold on the newsstands for 10 or 15 cents, now often bring 100 times that. And some sought-after numbers will command \$50 to \$100 if you find the right buyer. The market's there, but the dealers are finding it increasingly difficult to fill the orders. The pulp well has just about run dry.

The meticulous collector is after fine condition copies, and any one familiar with the pulps knows that unless kept in almost airtight conditions the cheap paper deteriorates, turns brown, and eventually crumbles. With the normal rate of deterioration, it's doubtful if too many of the mags will outlast their collectors.

Who are these collectors? Mainly they're in their 40s and 50s and first read many of the magazines as teenagers. For them, it's largely a matter of nostalgia. But there are also those in their teens or 20s who weren't even born when the pulps were battling for display on the nation's newsstands. For them it's "camp", just like collecting the so-called Golden Era comics of the early 1940s.

And there are some who were fortunate enough to buy the magazines when they first appeared and who have held onto them come hell or high water for the last 30 or 40 years. These are few in number, and apparently there exists no one person who had the foresight, interest, or bankroll to buy all of the hundreds of titles and thousands of issues published. So there are always new worlds to conquer, more titles to seek out, additional issues to buy to fill in those gaps.

Of course, 99 percent of the stories had no literary value and the bulk of the stories were being turned out by a relatively small group of hacks who thought nothing of producing a mil-

lion words of fiction in an average year.

Two fan publications have in recent years dedicated themselves to cataloging the early magazines, digging up facts on their obscure authors, and proclaiming the glories of that period. They are *The Pulp Era*, edited by Lynn Hickman of Wauseon, Wis., and *Bronze Shadows*, published by Fred Cook, who was raised in Teaneck but now lives in Jackson, Mich.

Among the authors whose names are legendary in the annals of the pulps were:

Frederick Faust, better known as Max Brand, who wrote the Doctor Kildare stories and was at home in almost any field of fiction. Faust, rated the highest paid of all pulpsters (\$100,000 a year at his peak), once turned out 2 million words in a single year. He wrote under 18 pseudonyms. His career ended prematurely with his death as a war correspondent in Italy in 1944. He was 52.

Erle Stanley Gardner, father of the Perry Mason series, was another high-

ly paid pulp writer who used to pound out 10,000 words a day. It's estimated he made \$75,000 a year.

Lester Dent, who died in 1959, wrote under the name of Kenneth Robeson. He was author of 165 of the 181 Doc Savage novels to appear between 1933 and 1949. The magazine, which at one time had a circulation of 200,000, was only one of several Dent contributed to regularly.

Walter Gibson, writing as Maxwell Grant, was author of 178 book-length stories (7.5 million words) about The Shadow between the magazine's start in 1931 until its demise in 1948. Until 1943, this publication appeared twice monthly and attained a peak circulation of more than 300,000. Its development as a radio series helped hypo its circulation.

Arthur J. Burks averaged more than a million words a year at the peak of his career. During the 1930s his income was a healthy \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year, but he recalls that when he first started in 1920 he earned exactly \$3.58. The best he

could do the next year was \$1.57. In his fifth year of writing he made \$525. After that it was all uphill financially.

"I once appeared on the covers of 11 magazines in the same month," recalls Burks. "And then almost killed myself for years trying to make it 12. I never did. Seven thereafter was the best I could do, or could at least find. But I wrote a couple of million words a year, selling enough to keep myself fed and earn the title of 'best dressed writer in New York' because actually I was one of the sloppiest."

Frank Gruber, who died at 65 just last month, hit his pulp peak with *Black Mask* magazine and then moved on to Hollywood, where, in 25 years, he wrote screenplays for 70 movies, developed three successful TV series, and sold 25 of his books for motion pictures. His book, "The Pulp Jungle", written in 1967, is a nostalgia-filled autobiography of the 1930s.

Robert J. Hogan was the creator of *G-8 and His Battle Aces* and between 1933 and 1944 he wrote most of the contents of 110 issues that appeared under that title.

Robert Wallace wrote more than 100 *Phantom Detective* novels in a 14-year period.

The late Henry Kutter, a leading SF writer, used close to 20 pen names. A friend recalls that once he had a novel due and hadn't even developed a plot. So he locked himself in a room for three days and emerged with a completed 80,000-word novel.

John Russell Fearn, British pulp writer, was probably the pseudonym champion. He used 35.

IRVING CRUMP (now 82) of Oradell and Arch Whitehouse (74) of Montvale are two local writers who were pulpsters early in their writing careers. Crump specialized in adventure stories while Whitehouse was one

Robert S. Hogan's "G-8 and His Battle Aces" was an interesting blend of World War I aviation and science fiction.



of the top names in the aviation field.

Harold Hersey, in his 1937 book "Pulpwood Editor", details his experiences as an editor and publisher of pulp magazines. His *Thrill Book*, published in 1919, carried some of the first science fiction stories and has been almost unobtainable for many years.

Tennessee (Thomas Lanier) Williams' first published story, sold when he was a 16-year-old high-school student, appeared in the August 1928 issue of *Weird Tales*. Entitled "The Vengeance of Nitrocris", it didn't even create a ripple in the turgid waters of the pulp sea.

Most magazines paid a cent a word, with the better known authors getting two cents. There was little time for rewriting or polishing a story if an author was to make a decent living.

While many of these authors built up almost fanatic followings, it was the cover artist who lured in the readers with his bright-colored interpretation of what one would find inside the magazine.

Most publications had a predictable style that almost dictated what the artist would draw each month. The one prerequisite seemed to be the presence of a pretty girl. She would be tortured on the cover of a horror magazine, threatened by a gun on a detective magazine, or bundled in a spacesuit on a science-fiction cover. Demure on the cover of a love magazine, sadistic on a *Weird Tales* cover, or rustic on a western cover, the female was almost always there to lure in what was considered to be a largely male audience.

Virtually every story carried at least one black and white illustration. Most of them were pretty bad. But out of the weird and science-fiction fields came at least two artists who were well above the norm. They were Virgil Finlay and the late Hannes Bok. Both were meticulous craftsmen who spent



Virtually every pulp story had accompanying illustrations, called "illos" in the pulp jargon. But they rarely approached the quality of this one by Virgil Finlay.

many hours producing a pen and ink drawing that consistently lost much of its quality on the coarse paper of the pulps. But it was a labor of love, since both were enthusiastic readers of this literature as youths. Today, many of their illustrations are collectors' items.

The crime fighters had their heyday in the 1930s with men like Clark Savage Jr. (Doc Savage), Lamont Cranston (The Shadow), Richard Wentworth (The Spider), Jimmy Christopher (Operator 5), Cash Gorman (The Wizard), Wildcat Gordon (The Whisperer), Rex Parker (The Masked Detective), Richard Benson (The Avenger), and Jeffrey Fairchild (Dr. Skull).

More than 40 Doc Savage novels

have been reprinted in recent years by Bantam Books, which has just started publishing the annals of The Shadow. Meanwhile, Popular is starting to bring out The Spider in paperback after enjoying success with its first five Captain Future reprints. Captain Future was an intergalactic version of Doc Savage created by Edmond Hamilton and the name of a magazine published in the 1940-45 period.

Lancer Books can't keep pace with the demand for Robert E. Howard's Conan adventures, first carried in the pages of *Weird Tales* in the mid-1930s. After exhausting the Howard tales, the publisher has rounded up present-day authors to continue the

series. Ace and Ballantine have found the books of Edgar Rice Burroughs profitable; many of these stories originally appeared in the pulps.

Corinth Books of California printed some 40 volumes of *The Phantom Detective*, *Dr. Death*, *Dusty Ayres*, and *Operator 5* a few years ago.

But picking up these books in their spanking new format is a poor substitute for actually having in hand the original pulp publication, its flaking edges leaving a confetti-like covering wherever it goes, its bright cover often looking just as it did when it rolled off the presses 30 or 40 years ago. No, it's nice to know the tales are not forgotten, but it just isn't the same. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gerry da la Ree is executive sports editor of *The Record*. But his avocation is book and magazine collecting with the emphasis on science fiction. Among his 25,000 volumes, he lists complete runs of most of the SF magazines, Doc Savage, Shadow, The Spider, and many of the other magazines discussed in this article. Covers reproduced here are from his collection, which has taken him more than 30 years to amass.

